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Magnetizing Neighborhoods through Amateur Arts Performance

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There is a significant correlation between the amount of amateur, informal arts activity and neighborhood stability and/or improvement. This correlation is evidence of *magnetization*—an increase in the desirability, commitment, social integration, and quality of life in a community area. We believe this is so because arts make public spaces enjoyable, they create shared experience, and they encourage intergenerational activity.

Components of comprehensive community development should include space for amateur and semi-professional performance. There are many ways for philanthropy, government and the private sector to support the supply of informal arts, the demand for informal arts, and the availability of space.

The Value of Arts Activity

Documenting the “value” of local arts has been a topic of lively research and debate for more than twenty years. Early *multiplier studies* measured the scope of the professional arts sector—counting revenues and employees in professional arts establishments such as symphony, opera, theaters, and museums, multiplying by an economic “multiplier,” and reporting the result as an estimate of the economic impact of the local arts industry. However, multiplier studies usually do not address the value of the arts for neighborhoods since venues for the professional arts sector are typically located downtown or in only a few select neighborhoods.

More recently, *creative class studies* have focused on the arts as an environmental attraction by which cities lure high-value-added “creative” industries. The argument is that the artistic cachet of a city is an important asset that supports the lifestyle of the “creative” workers in those industries—computer and math scientists, architects, engineers, social scientists, designers, and entertainers.¹ The cachet argument expands the scope of the value of the arts in two very important ways:

- The list of arts activities considered “valuable” is expanded to include semi-professional and amateur activities that appeal to high-pay “creative” workers; examples are poetry readings or open-mic coffeehouse performances.

¹ See, for instance, Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic, 2002).

- The list of places where valuable arts activity can occur is expanded to include neighborhoods anywhere in the city where high-pay “creative” workers might go to experience those activities.

Cachet studies address neighborhood benefits to the extent that high-pay, creative workers might want to travel to those neighborhoods for arts experiences, or even choose to live there.

What is a *magnetization study*? Data are presented to show that arts activities are desired by neighborhood residents, whether or not they are high-pay “creative” workers, and that neighborhoods with higher concentrations of arts activity have higher levels of neighborhood commitment and involvement. This magnetization of neighborhoods through the arts (as well as other activities) is associated with higher levels of neighborhood stability and/or improvement. To rule out economic level as a factor, all of the data presented in this paper are from low-income neighborhoods.² The focus on low-income areas also allows a more specific discussion of the role that appropriately-conceived arts activities might have in strategies for neighborhood development.

Three Ways Arts Magnetize Low-Income Neighborhoods

1. Arts magnetize public spaces with fun.

In his work *City: Rediscovering the Center*, sociologist William H. Whyte summarized the results of several years of videotaping plazas, intersections, and other public spaces in recommendations to planning and zoning commissions on the design of urban areas to maximize their public use and enjoyment.³ One of Whyte’s principal recommendations was to encourage street performers and other kinds of amateur arts presentation because arts are fun and they create a place where people want to be. Whyte proposed a social indicator—smiles per hour—as a way to capture and measure the impact on the quality of local life of a significant arts presence and the serendipity value of an unexpected, free public arts presentation.

The performing arts enliven public spaces. (Whyte p. 151)

Smaller, informal presentations are the bread and butter of community arts programming. (p. 151)

It is interesting to watch people as they chance upon an entertainer. So often they will smile. . . People enjoy programmed entertainment too, but

² In fact, however, when the data are analyzed for other economic levels, the impact of arts activity on positive neighborhood outcomes (i.e., the magnetic effect) is about the same in each area—i.e., controlling for economic level.

³ William H. Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

not the same way. It is the unexpected that seems to delight them the most. (Whyte, p. 35)

2. Arts magnetize by creating shared experience.

The second mechanism by which amateur arts drive the magnetization of neighborhoods is rooted in the underpinnings of the 19th century City Beautiful—urban parks and urban settlement house movements. Each expressed the idea that arts magnetize communities by creating shared experience. The biography of Frederick Law Olmstead documents the relationship between his new ideas of urban landscape and the writings of psychologist William James about shared public experience and community building.⁴ Chicago was the home base of Jens Jensen, a student of Olmstead's work, who consciously built the Olmstead/James view of arts and community into the design of several of the major public parks in the city.⁵

Places for outdoor drama were prominent in Jensen's landscape designs, plays became an important tool for teaching people about each other and their relationship to the world around them. (Grese, p. 42)

As Jensen's biography documents, he was also influenced strongly by Jane Addams' settlement house movement—based in Chicago as well—which relied heavily on amateur arts performance and cultural creation as a method for community building in and among Chicago immigrant neighborhoods.

He believed, from folk schools in Denmark and Hull House in Chicago, that arts programming encouraged a sense of community. (Grese, p. 76)

3. Arts magnetize through intergenerational activity.

The third mechanism by which amateur arts drives the magnetization of neighborhoods is based on the theory of social capital—that arts magnetize through intergenerational activity. Teenagers are often the missing link in social capital theory. Informal, amateur arts activity is one of the few places outside family and schools where adults, college students, and teenagers interact freely and willingly with one another.⁶

An interesting social experiment currently underway in Chicago reflects the awareness of the causal mechanisms for magnetizing neighborhoods. The New

⁴ Witold Rybczynski, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmstead in the 19th Century* (New York: Touchstone, 1999).

⁵ Robert Grese, *Jens Jensen: Maker of Natural Parks and Gardens* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992).

⁶ The Olmstead/Jensen/James/Addams theory of arts and the value for community of shared experience is also a social capital argument.

Communities Program (NCP) is a neighborhood development plan based on a model of planning comprehensive initiatives from the ground up.⁷ One NCP activity is a competitive community grants program to which locally-based neighborhood organizations apply for funds for projects they have identified as important and feasible. During the first four years of NCP, about 25 percent of all grants requested and awarded were for arts programs.

The list of projects illustrates the practical application of the three principles for magnetizing neighborhoods through the arts:

- Community murals
- A multicultural healing garden and sculpture park
- Locally produced street banners to brand the local community area
- A local community radio show where resident adults with radio expertise assist local high school “disc jockeys,” thereby creating social capital linkages of learning and influence
- Local recording of local community spoken word and rap events
- Festivals—a summer arts festival, an arts and film festival at a local public library, a “day of the dead” festival
- Bomba (dance and drum) classes with the stated purpose of using amateur arts to create a forum where people from different ethnic and immigrant communities could share experiences, and thereby defuse hostility and violence in the neighborhood
- The lease of a building with an open microphone coffeehouse for university students to share publications and performances with younger people, thereby creating social capital linkages of learning and influence

Measuring Change Associated with Local, Amateur, Informal Arts Activity

The neighborhood indicators of amateur, informal arts activity were developed during Metropolitan Chicago Information Center’s (MCIC) participation in the Arts and Cultural Indicators in Community Building Project (ACIP) coordinated by the Urban Institute. At the time the Cultural Indicators Project began, Alaka Wali, an anthropologist working at Chicago’s Field Museum and also a collaborator with ACIP, had already published a widely-accepted statement that formal, professional arts activities are important for understanding the “arts industry,” but the little-documented, lesser-understood, *and much larger* amateur/informal arts sector is more important for understanding local neighborhood development.⁸ MCIC’s role in the Cultural Indicators Project was to operationalize Wali’s work and bring it into the field of neighborhood development—to systematically measure the presence of informal, amateur arts activity in a neighborhood, and

⁷ <http://www.newcommunities.org/>

⁸ Alaka Wali et al., *The Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity And Other Cultural Benefits In Unexpected Places* (Chicago: Field Museum, 2002).

to study the relationship between the level of informal arts activity and the pattern of neighborhood development.

The key to understanding the impact of informal amateur arts is to recognize that the total arts industry consists of a much broader spectrum of activities than is normally considered by simply counting professional venues or professionals employed in the arts industry. The total arts industry consists of any kind of performance—defined as a public event with a public audience - including:

- The *professional* sector—professional shows/displays/performance in formal settings, such as museums, theaters, stadiums;
- The *mid-range* sector—semi-professional performances such as musicals, spoken word open microphones, drumming circles, community plays, church choirs, public readings, poetry clubs, or dance groups that might take place in settings such as places of worship, park district facilities, public libraries, community cultural centers, book/music stores, or bars/coffee houses; and,
- The *amateur* sector—performances or public presentations by amateurs or hobbyists such as displays of photography, quilts, or antiques, that might take place in completely informal settings such as parks, on the street, or at home.

The amateur and mid-range sectors of the arts industry are much larger than the professional sector. An estimate of the size of the professional sector, using definitions from conventional economic impact studies, would be 20,700 professional artists, designers, writers, actors, and related workers in the Chicago region, according to 2006 data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The amateur and mid-range sectors combined are about 20 to 30 times larger. Using a definition remarkably similar to those used in Wali's report, the most recent Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) by the National Endowment for the Arts finds that 38 percent of adults in the Chicago region engaged in some sort of public artistic presentation. An estimate of the maximum size of the mid range and amateur sectors of the arts industry would be 825,500 people who each year engage in activities such as the following (based on questions from the NEA survey):

- Ceramics, jewelry, leatherwork, metalwork
- Weaving, crocheting, quilting, needlepoint, sewing
- Photography, movies, videotaping as an arts activity
- Painting, drawing, sculpture, printmaking
- Creative writing, music composition
- Playing jazz, classical music
- Singing operas, musicals, in groups
- Acting, dancing

Measuring Informal Arts Activity: Underlying Data

Cities will not usually have survey results to measure informal arts at the neighborhood level. However, MCIC identified numerous institutional data bases that can be mined to compare the level of informal arts activity across the entire city.

- From city records we found information about
 - public parks with performance rooms and arts programming
 - public libraries with arts programming
 - parades
 - street festivals
- From business address databases we located
 - cultural centers with arts programming
 - book stores
- From local arts councils, support websites and membership organizations we obtained locations for
 - art fairs
 - theaters
 - studios
 - performance spaces

The primary limitations of the data are (1) we did not count the number participating in each arts activity; rather, we recorded the presence or absence of various types of participatory activities; and (2) data are not accessible for all types of informal arts activities. For instance,

- There are about 650 churches in Chicago, many of which have choirs, but without a survey there is no way to determine which churches have choirs
- There are a great many bars and coffeehouses where scheduled and open-mic performances take place but there is no way to determine which bars and coffeehouses have performances, short of a survey.

Measuring Informal Arts Activity: Tract Scores

Even with these limitations, however, we are able to create a plausible tract score for informal arts activity by creating an address for each type of activity, creating a geographic radius “buffer” for each address, and, for each tract, adding up the number of buffers that overlap tract boundaries.

The result is a tract-level score that shows a widespread distribution and considerable diversity in the level of informal arts activity.

The relationship between arts and neighborhood development is measured by correlating the level of amateur, informal arts performance in a census tract with

changes in several measures of neighborhood ambience and stability in the tract:⁹

1. Population growth and ability to stem population loss
2. Increased number of housing units and ability to stem loss
3. Improved grade school test scores
4. Decline in personal crime rate
5. Decline in property crime rate
6. Economic change in housing values, mortgage capital flow

To control for the effect of socioeconomic level, the data are analyzed separately for different tract income levels. The data presented in this report are from the 279 Chicago tracts in the lowest third of the income distribution.¹⁰ The principal limitation on the research design is the well-known correlational caveat—i.e., tracts are not randomly assigned to an economic level or to a level of amateur arts performance. But the design used here is stronger than basic correlational studies in two respects: (a) it is a change score design rather than a cross-sectional design—i.e., it is the *change* in neighborhood outcome that is correlated with the level of arts activity;¹¹ (b) the impact model is grounded in theories (cachet, shared experience, intergenerational transmission, social capital) that have stood the tests of time, critical review, and absorption into the decision-making processes of influential forces that guide how resources and facilities become available to support community change.¹²

There is a significant correlation between the amount of amateur, informal arts activity and several measures of neighborhood stability and/or improvement. The graphs below show the tract score on the amount of informal arts activity on the x-axis. Each graph shows a different measure of neighborhood stability/improvement on the y-axis.

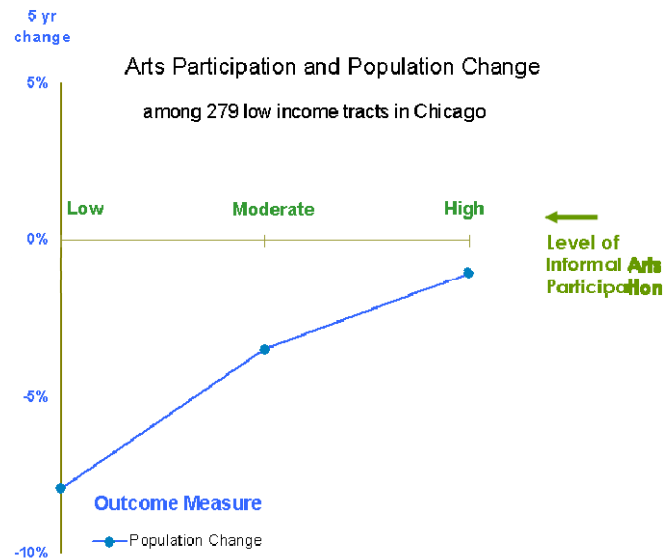
⁹ There are other measures of neighborhood ambience and stability that would be desirable to analyze, but not too many others satisfy the necessary criteria of being high-quality, short-term, tract-level repeated measures.

¹⁰ Of the 279 low income tracts, 92 have a “low” level of informal arts activity, 138 are in the “middle,” and 49 have a “high” level of activity.

¹¹ The use of change scores helps reduce the threat of “spurious” effects -- the counterfactual becomes more difficult to define in a way that makes intuitive sense.

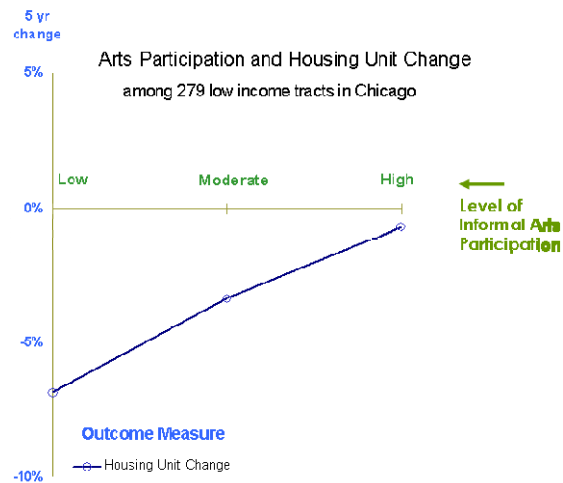
¹² To paraphrase sociologist W. I. Thomas, “At some point situations become real if people keep defining them as real”—i.e., if people say they did X in order to cause Y, and they were the ones who did X, and they did it just before Y happened, then we are obliged to believe that the case is substantially stronger that X caused Y. Thomas actually said “situations are real if people define them as real,” but the practical import of his statement is clearer in the paraphrase.

Evidence of Magnetic Properties of Amateur Arts Creation—POPULATION



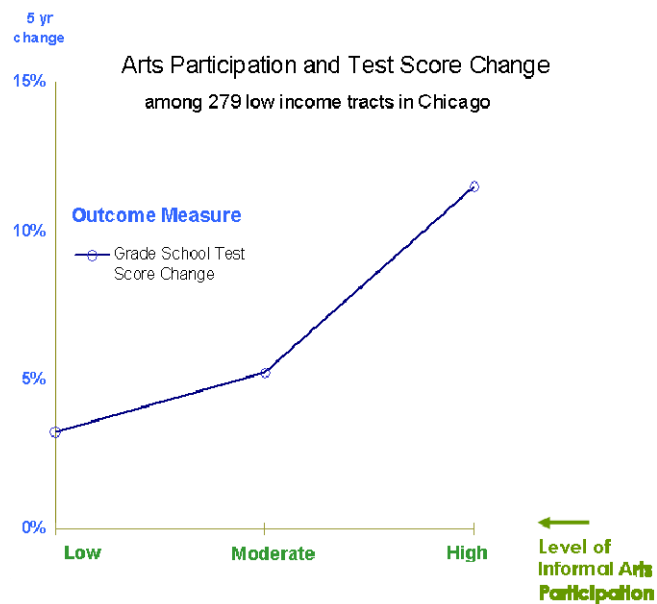
Population change—the relation is positive (the line goes up) indicating that over a five-year span low income neighborhoods with more arts activity lost fewer residents than did neighborhoods with less arts activity.

Evidence of Magnetic Properties of Amateur Arts Creation—HOUSING



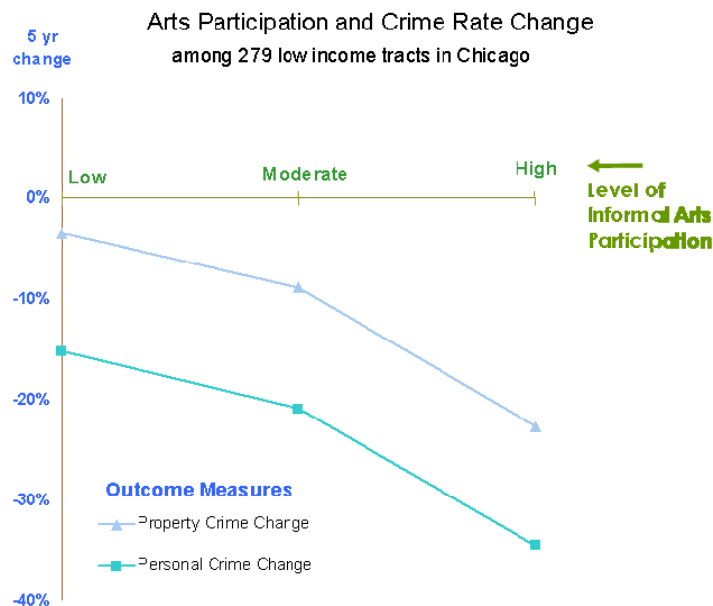
Number of housing units—the relation is positive (the line goes up) indicating that over a five-year span low-income neighborhoods with more arts activity lost fewer households than did neighborhoods with less arts activity.

Evidence of Magnetic Properties of Amateur Arts Creation—SCHOOL TEST SCORES



Grade school test scores loss—the relation is positive (the line goes up) indicating that over a five-year span low-income neighborhoods with more arts activity showed a greater increase in elementary school test scores than did neighborhoods with less arts activity.

Evidence of Magnetic Properties of Amateur Arts Creation—CRIME RATES



Personal crime rate, property crime rate—in each case the relation is negative (the line goes down) indicating that over a five-year span low-income neighborhoods with more arts activity showed a larger *decrease* in crime rates than did neighborhoods with less arts activity.

These correlations are consistent with the method by which it is believed that arts make communities more attractive, and the value that this “magnetization” brings to the neighborhood: (a) the greater ability of high-arts neighborhoods to stem loss of population and households supports the interpretation that arts magnetize by making neighborhoods fun—a place where people want to be; (b) the greater increase in grade school test scores in high-arts neighborhoods is consistent with the observation that arts create more avenues for beneficial intergenerational contact; (c) the greater decrease in crime rates in high-arts neighborhoods supports the view that arts magnetize by creating shared experience. (The reduction of crime through the development of social ties, and shared experiences among neighborhood residents is one of the principal findings of the extensive research on social capital and collective efficacy.¹³)

No Consistent Link between Informal Arts Participation and Economic Change Measures

The research, however, found no consistent link between informal arts participation and economic change measures—household income level, number of home mortgage loans, number of business loans, or business construction/rehab. Arts activity is associated with less loss of population, better school performance, and lower crime. But these changes do not translate directly into short-term changes in the economic level of the neighborhood, possibly because the high-arts areas in our sample are a more diverse cross-section of the city than is normally considered in the maps of gentrifying, “bohemian” arts neighborhoods. Another possibility is that, at least in some cases, arts activity is one of the organizing tools of community opposition to rapid gentrification and community turnover.

Informal Artists Are the Link between Professional Arts and Community Change

Support for informal, amateur arts should be one of the tools for comprehensive community development. This is not to say that there should be a redirection of attention and support away from the professional arts sector. The professional arts sector in a city or region is key to establishing the standards and skills that are transmitted to local neighborhoods through the efforts of amateur and semi-professional artists. The 825,500 amateur and semi-professional performers in the Chicago region constitute a disproportionate share of the market for attending

¹³ Sampson, Robert J., et al. 1997. “Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy.” *Science* 277:918–24.

professional performances, and purchasing lessons, goods, and other services from the 20,700 individuals who constitute the professional tier in the Chicago area. The standards and skills acquired by the amateur and semi-professional performers in these transactions then flow more broadly into the neighborhoods through the efforts of the amateur and semi-professional tier. One tier is not more important than the other; rather both are elements of a more comprehensive ecology that includes both formal and informal arts activity.¹⁴

Real Estate Policy and “Third Places”

A number of years ago the sociologist Ray Oldenburg analyzed the importance for community well-being of low-cost, low-commitment, low-brow venues such as bars, coffeehouses, and multi-purpose community rooms, which he referred to as “third places”—in contrast to the first place (home) and the second place (work) where people spend most of their time.¹⁵

Space should be preserved for amateur and semi-professional performance. In sunbelt climates, the weather allows for amateur arts performances almost year-round via low-capitalization outdoor spaces. In the midwestern United States however, outdoor festivals are limited to the summer months. Full development of the potential for neighborhood amateur arts performance, and thereby full development of the ability to reap its benefits, requires year-round access to indoor spaces that are¹⁶

- Low cost (low/no entry fee, low rent);
- Low commitment (easy to enter, easy to exit); and,
- Low brow (informal, comfortable atmosphere).

In Midwestern cities, public libraries, park district buildings, and other public offices are elements of the built infrastructure that can be used 12 months a year. These spaces are low cost, but they are not the only solution to the space problem because they are not always low commitment or completely informal. Whether there are commercial and/or storefront spaces available to fulfill the need for amateur arts performance depends on real estate development practices and priorities.

Supports to the Informal Arts Sector

As part of its project for the Arts and Cultural Indicators in Community Building Project, MCIC interviewed directors of several amateur and semi-professional

¹⁴ Patronage by the amateur and semi-professional sector is also a key economic asset that sustains the income and economic viability of the professional sector.

¹⁵ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day* (Paragon House, 1989).

¹⁶ See the discussion in Wali (2002).

arts organizations to learn the kinds of supports that helped them. The principal finding, and the third implication of this report, is that there are many ways for philanthropy, government and the private sector to support the supply of informal arts, the demand for informal arts, and the availability of space within which informal, amateur arts can play a positive role in neighborhood development:

- Supply side supports included: (a) philanthropic grants to organizations and programs, such as the grants to support arts performance listed in this report from the New Communities Program; (b) state and local government grants provided to the People's Music School, and the city's neighborhood Cultural Centers; (c) local government donation of advertising (People's Music School).
- Demand side supports included: (a) full programs for instruction and participation purchased by the city Park District and the city Public Library; (b) individual performances purchased for specific events (People's Music School, Dance Workshops).
- Real estate supports included: (a) donated land and/or building (Old Town School, People's Music School); (b) free use of space (Park District, Public Library); (c) favorable licensing, permitting, zoning (bar, coffeehouse, street activities, park activities); favorable tax policy (place of worship).

Implications

The purpose of this report is to show that arts and cultural activities are a very important piece of the community development agenda, not only because of their ability to attract an audience, and "brand" cities and neighborhoods as desirable locations, but also because of the way that informal, amateur arts participation makes everyday life in neighborhoods more valuable to residents by "magnetization" through fun, shared experience, and increased intergenerational contact. Some of the important implications of this way of thinking are that (a) support for informal, amateur arts should be one of the tools for comprehensive community development; (b) space needs to be preserved for amateur and semi-professional performance; (c) philanthropy, government and the private sector should support the supply of informal arts, the demand for informal arts, and the availability of space.